

Tom the Obsessive

Tom was, or rather had been, a kleptomaniac - but no ordinary kleptomaniac. It had begun many years ago in his teens as a schoolboy dare. He had lifted packets of cigarettes from a shop and won credit among his mates. He had soon gained a reputation as an accomplished shoplifter. Whereas his mates sooner or later got themselves caught and faced a police warning or worse, he was never caught.

But he found this sort of thievery boring and his crowd of mates immature. He gradually dropped out of this circle of friends and they assumed he had given up shoplifting.

Tom despised their boorishness and greed; he stole just for the sake of succeeding at theft. What the object was, was not the important thing. It was the planning and actual theft that excited Tom. The more difficult the theft, the better he liked it. The gaining of intelligence, the staking out and the planning was what he enjoyed the most. The actual theft itself was often an anticlimax, but it did mean that one more object was added to his collection.

In his late teens, keeping this collection secret from anyone else had been a problem. But as Tom spent a great deal of time planning each theft, the collection did not grow too quickly. When he finished school he went through college and eventually got a clerking job in a local firm and was able to save enough to buy himself a small maisonette. Keeping his collection became easier. He devoted a whole room to it; he called it his "hobby room" and his acquisitions were set out and neatly labelled as though they were exhibits in a museum.

Tom was not a very social creature; it would be safer, he thought, to keep people at a distance. He was amiable enough at work and had some there who might be termed friends. But such friendships were kept strictly to the workplace. As for family, Tom was an only child who had been born when his mother was in her forties and father already in his fifties and most of his relatives tended to be a good deal older than him. He kept on reasonable terms with them but did not see them more than he had to.

Nor did Tom get himself involved in any romantic attachment. If sexual feelings had ever stirred within him, he was unaware of them and they had died long ago. His "hobby", as he called it, seemed to more than satisfy him.

It was not just the difficulty of a theft that was important to Tom. The idea of stealing a great horde of stuff from one place had no appeal to him. That would be certain to be reported immediately and police would be involved from the start. That kind of theft was prompted by greed and was only a means to an end. He also noticed in the news when such thieves were caught, their methods had often involved violence and were, he thought, crude.

Tom always contented himself with one or two items in any particular theft. If the items were of high value that was satisfactory, not because of any monetary value to Tom himself but simply because such items were usually more difficult to steal. He always planned very carefully and carried out his thefts so that no one was likely to know straightaway that a theft had been committed. Usually it was several days or, sometimes, many weeks after the theft that the objects were missed, sometimes assumed to be misplaced somewhere in the house. If the police were ever involved, the trail had long gone quite cold.

Tom took great pride in his hobby and his skill at it. Since he obviously could not tell anyone else about it, he had from his late teens been in a habit of telling his diary. He kept meticulous records of his planning and thefts and catalogued the objects as he added them to his collection. These diaries had always been kept locked away and when he acquired his "hobby room" they were kept locked in a safe there.

So Tom's double life continued for very many years: an amiable colleague at work and

friendly enough towards family but, away from work and family, a solitary, methodical and obsessive kleptomaniac.

This changed dramatically for Tom in his late forties. When he returned home from work one day, he felt something was not right though he could not see anything odd immediately. But when he went to his hobbies room he was astounded to find it completely empty – even the safe with his diaries was gone! Tom was stunned. He could not very well report this theft to the police nor, of course, was his collection insured. He did not know what to do.

Although he rarely spoke to his neighbours, he did go next door to ask if they had seen anything.

“Only the removal van,” his neighbour said. “They were there for quite a time this morning. They said you were putting some of your stuff into storage.”

“Did you see what they were bringing out?” asked Tom a little apprehensively.

“No,” his neighbour said, much to Tom's relief. “Everything was in large removal boxes. Why, have they taken something you didn't want them to?”

'Everything' Tom thought, but said: “There was just one box that was not quite ready.”

“Oh well,” said his neighbour. “You'd better get on to them, 'Tea Leaf Removals and Storage.' Funny name, I thought.”

“Yes,” replied Tom, “I will. Thank you. Good night!”

Tom was well aware what 'tea leaf' meant in Cockney rhyming slang.

Although Tom had had a computer for several years, he had only recently been connected to the Internet. He searched on Google for 'Tea Leaf Removals and Storage' and, as he expected, found no trace of them. While browsing on his computer he was unnerved at seeing a smiley face appearing at odd intervals. It occurred to him that this might be connected to the theft of his collection. How had they known about it? He kept his diaries under lock and key.

He remembered he had downloaded photos on his computer over the years when he had been staking out properties and had made the odd note or two as he was planning. He had even had two or three photos of his hobbies room on his computer. But he had deleted all these before he had taken his computer into a local shop for repair and upgrade two weeks ago. It was then he decided to have broadband. Since then he had been *very* careful what he did on his computer.

Tom spent a restless and uncomfortable night. The next day in work he casually mentioned to Bushra, the IT manager, that if you deleted stuff from your computer it was not there on your hard disk any more. Bushra gave a little laugh.

“That's what many people think,” she grinned. “But it isn't so.”

“Oh,” said Tom, trying not to sound particularly alarmed.

“No,” said Bushra, “all it means is that it is no longer marked as needed and will eventually be written over.”

“So it means,” said Tom, “that stuff is still there if you've only just recently deleted it and someone who knew how, like an IT technician, could read it?”

“That's just about it,” agreed Bushra. “So be careful what you put on your computer,” she added with a laugh.

“Yes, I will,” said Tom, thinking the information was a bit late now.

It dawned on Tom that someone at the IT shop had seen enough on his hard disk to realize

there might be something worth looking for at Tom's house. This was confirmed when one evening as Tom was browsing on his computer a pop-up message appeared: "You've been a naughty boy, Thomas. Don't do it again. We're watching you!"

That made Tom feel very uncomfortable; it effectively killed off his kleptomania obsession and paranoia began to set in. But what could he do about it? He could hardly complain to the police or even to the shop. He was ashamed that someone had successfully stolen from him, and he was worried that they might approach the police.

Messages continued to pop up about once a month which fuelled Tom's paranoia. Then about a year later Tom was astounded at seeing a book called, 'Diaries of a Thief,' in a local bookshop. It was written, it said, by Thomas T. Leefe. Tom went into the shop and had a look at the book. As he browsed through the pages, he realized he was reading his own diaries. "Identity theft," he murmured, though he assumed T. Leefe was a pseudonym.

Over the next two or three weeks, the book caused quite a stir and was often in the news as people from all over England recognized items mentioned and their disappearance. It was becoming apparent that these really were the diaries of a thief and sales of the book soared. Speculation grew about who the thief might be and why he had published his diaries.

Then one month after the book's publication the police received an anonymous tip-off and found all the stolen objects in a lock-up garage in south-west London. Tom was dumbstruck as he saw pictures on the television of his collection all neatly set out and labelled just as it had been in his hobbies room, except for the safe. His diaries were not there.

Over the following weeks items were reunited with owners. The police tried to find out who the author of the book was and who owned the lock-up garage. The publisher, who had assumed the diaries were fiction, cooperated but all trails seem to lead nowhere or to lead abroad. Tom became convinced the net was closing in on him and went to his local police station to hand himself in; but he was not believed. He was dismissed as yet another crank who wanted to claim notoriety for the thefts and diary.

Tom's paranoia had led to his becoming obsessed by conspiracy theories. This obsession was fuelled by conspiracy theories he found on the World Wide Web in blogs, U-Tube videos and in social media. Clearly he himself had been a victim of just such a conspiracy.

Tom now belongs to several online groups concerned with such theories; and once a week his former "hobbies room" now hosts the local branch of the Flat Earth Society as they discuss the conspiracies that deceive people into thinking the earth is a globe. Unlike his former obsession, Tom's current obsession has brought him friends outside of work.